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## **Officials say Pepco did fairly well considering the conditions it faced**

### **Public Service Commission reviewing complaints statewide**

by Margie Hyslop | Staff writer

Although thousands of county homes and businesses went days without electricity, government and utility officials say that the utilities did a relatively good job in unprecedented circumstances last week.

"I don't know what more could have been done," said Montgomery County Council President Nancy M. Floreen, who is chairwoman of the Transportation, Infrastructure, Energy and Environment Committee.

As of 2 p.m. Tuesday, Pepco reported 53 customers were without power in Montgomery County, but many appeared to be new outages.

Floreen was among many residents and council members who went without electric service for days during a week when county residents struggled with 3 feet of snow, wind and mounds piled taller than people.

Still, Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park said, "I don't blame any of my constituents for being frustrated." She said she got a large number of calls that she couldn't return because her Comcast telephone service also failed.

At the peak, 105,000 Pepco customers were without power during the first of the two snowstorms that struck within a week, and probably more than half of those were in Montgomery, said Robert Dobkin, a spokesman for the utility. Over the two storms, Pepco, which serves most of Montgomery, restored almost 400,000 customers, including some who had multiple outages, he said.

Floreen said she believes the number of outages might have been higher if not for an increase in tree trimming since Hurricane Isabel in 2003.

Councilman Roger Berliner, who is on the energy committee and whose home in Potomac was without power for two days, said he believes Pepco did "everything it could in a situation that was extremely difficult to do well in."

There were indications early on that the county's plowing wasn't synchronized with the dispatching of utility repair crews "to the maximum extent possible," said Berliner (D-Dist. 1).

"I never want to hear from Pepco [that] they could have turned on power sooner but for the ability to get there," he said.

Councilwoman Valerie Ervin (D-Dist. 5), whose Silver Spring home was without electricity for five days, said she believes the county did a better job plowing roads than Pepco did restoring power.

Power restoration is scheduled with public safety the top priority and getting the maximum number of customers back up, said Andre Francis, another Pepco spokesman.

If a tree knocks out power to one house, that homeowner will wait longer than someone who lives in a neighborhood where many lost electricity. Waits also can be longer for those who live in areas that are hard to access, he said.

In some places, utility crews had to walk to the work site through hip-high snow. In others, such as a Zion and Gregg roads in Brookeville, Pepco had to hire private contractors to plow a swath wide enough to get large repair trucks in.

Around midday Feb. 10, when the second storm was in progress, Pepco called crews off of repairs for about five hours until high winds, a safety risk for linemen, abated. Baltimore Gas and Electric, which serves a northeastern section of the county, also halted some repairs until winds subsided.

With such heavy snow cover, crews had to worry about what they couldn't see, such as in-ground pools.

Dobkin said that on the afternoon of Feb. 9, about 1,800 Pepco customers still lacked electricity because of outages from the first storm, which began Feb. 5. Crews were dispatched to restore those customers before the second storm hit.

BGE and Allegheny Power, which serves rural western and northern parts of the county, reported no customers without power in Montgomery.

Statewide, customers have filed 18 complaints about outages with the Maryland Public Service Commission, according to spokeswoman Lawanda Edwards. Six complaints involved Pepco, nine were against BGE, two were against Allegheny and one involved Southern Maryland Electric Cooperative, which does not serve Montgomery.

The Public Service Commission is still evaluating the response and has not discussed an investigation, Edwards said. More complaints could come in when customers get potentially high estimated bills from utilities whose readers could not reach their meters to record actual use, she said.

Staff Writer Erin Cunningham contributed to this report.

Complaints about large estimated bills were a key factor in the commission's decision last year to investigate billing practices of the utilities during cold weather.

Customers able to read the meters themselves can contact their utility about getting adjustments.